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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: MOHAN BHAGWAT NEW RSS CHIEF

REF: NEW DELHI 298

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) selected 59-year old Mohan Bhagwat as its new leader, replacing the 78-year old K.S. Sudarshan who stepped down citing health problems. Bhagwat is the youngest chief in RSS history and represents a "generational change" in the organization. He is viewed as a Hindutva ideologue who, at the same time, welcomes change as the RSS seeks to broaden its membership. Many expect Bhagwat to redefine the RSS relationship with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by putting added pressure on political leaders to advance a Hindutva agenda. Bhagwat is a supporter of the BJP prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. End Summary.

RSS gets its youngest chief

¶12. (SBU) The RSS -- the ideological core of Hindutva organizations including the BJP -- went through a generational change on March 21 with the appointment of Mohan Rao Bhagwat, 59, as the youngest leader in the 84-year history of the organization. Bhagwat replaced 78-year old K.S. Sudarshan, who retired from the post amid health concerns. Bhagwat joined the RSS as a volunteer in Akola, Maharashtra, during Indira Gandhi's emergency rule in the mid-1970s. He quickly rose through the ranks as the district and regional head of several RSS branches. In 2000, Bhagwat was elected the RSS General Secretary, the second highest office in the organization. He is highly regarded by the RSS rank and file as an "energetic" leader, who will strengthen the recruitment of young people into the organization. His appointment also comes as the BJP is trying to woo the youthful Indian electorate -- people under the age of 35 account for 70 percent of India's population -- but has an aging prime ministerial candidate in 81-year old L.K. Advani. Bhagwat's good rapport with BJP leaders is expected to help in "bridging the gap" that had existed between the Sangh and the BJP under his predecessor's watch.

"A stickler for ideology," yet willing to change with the times

¶13. (SBU) The new chief will likely enforce discipline

within the RSS ranks. He is seen as a committed ideologue on the basic tenets of Hindutva. Addressing a group of young RSS volunteers the day of his selection, Bhagwat sent a clear message to cadres that the Sangh should change with the times while staying committed to core ideological principles. "It (Hindutva) is a formula that has kept our country and society together...We are like a tree that bends in the storm but doesn't leave its roots," he declared.

¶4. (SBU) Many believe that his appointment represents a change in organizational focus as the RSS seeks to broaden its youth base, particularly within cities where recruitment of youth in the 18-35 age group has lagged. RSS insiders have told us that it has been difficult to convince the younger generation to subscribe to the austere RSS volunteer lifestyle. (Note: RSS volunteers are expected to dedicate their lives to the Sangh Parivar and are discouraged from other full-time employment or marriage. End Note.) Bhagwat is seen as the "great hope" for recruiting and retaining the future generation of RSS members. Contacts noted that under his watch as RSS General Secretary, enrollments increased significantly.

Putting the house back in order...

¶5. (SBU) With Bhagwat's appointment, the RSS is also expected to regain clout among its affiliates, particularly the BJP. The RSS had lost its organizational supremacy with the rise of Atal Bihari Vajpayee as Prime Minister. Some

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analysts pointed out that the 1999-2004 Vajpayee government did little to advance a Hindutva agenda so as not to antagonize its not-so-Hindutva-minded allies. (Note: Current Hindutva political demands include: the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh; the repeal of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution granting special status to Jammu and Kashmir; and the implementation of a uniform civil code for all Indians instead of separate family laws for Muslims. End Note.) But, now there are signs of factionalism and petty infighting within the BJP (Ref. A), which has left an opening for the Bhagwat-led RSS to reinstate its authority. For all his cross RSS-BJP appeal and years of political service, many expect Bhagwat to energize the RSS base and to inject more Hindutva ideology into BJP political campaigns and governing policies.

¶6. (SBU) Bhagwat is often compared to M.S. Golwalkar, the second RSS chief, who believed that Hindutva ideological principles trump electoral politics. Like Golwalkar, Bhagwat has focused on strengthening the RSS organizational structure by increasing the recruitment and retention rate of members. Sudarshan and past RSS leaders, in contrast, have focused less on achieving a Hindutva agenda and more emphasis on winning elections.

¶7. (SBU) There have been some signs of change in the BJP campaign message since Bhagwat's selection two weeks ago. In his first broadcast TV interview since elections campaigning commenced, L.K. Advani pledged to concentrate more on the development of "Bharat" rather than "India." Advani for the first time admitted that the Vajpayee-led government was overly concerned about its secular allies rather than advancing a Hindutva agenda.

Friend of Advani and Modi

¶8. (SBU) On the eve of parliamentary elections, Bhagwat's appointment is seen as a boost for the BJP's prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani. Bhagwat helped Advani secure the prime ministerial candidacy last year when some Sangh members raised concerns about Advani's ability to mount sustained, ideologically-driven attacks against the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. It was at Bhagwat's

insistence, observers noted, that a three-member RSS delegation visited L.K. Advani's residence in early January to resolve internal RSS-BJP disputes ahead of April-May polls.

¶19. (U) Bhagwat is also closely associated with Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. He stood solidly behind Modi when many RSS leaders had shunned him for his perceived "arrogance" during the 2007 state assembly elections. Bhagwat was one of the few RSS members present at the April 2008 launch for Modi's book profiling the sixteen "most influential" RSS leaders. Bhagwat also attended Advani's book release in March 2008.

Comment: Striking a balance

¶10. (SBU) Besides representing a generational change, the Bhagwat appointment is significant in that it may represent an opportunity for this increasing anachronistic organization to reshape itself into a viable 21st century institution. Although his appointment was not unexpected, it sent a ripple through the right-of-center political establishment. Bhagwat will be watched closely to see if he can strike the optimum balance between advancing Hindutva ideology and adjusting to modern political realities. Ahead of April-May parliamentary elections, the BJP needs the RSS -- it provides the most dedicated cadre for the campaign -- but does not need a RSS overload. Beyond a certain point, heated RSS Hindutva rhetoric can have an electoral backlash. End Comment.

Biographical Notes

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¶11. (SBU) Mohan Bhagwat was born in Maharashtra in 1950. He joined the RSS as a volunteer in Akola, Maharashtra, in the mid-1970s. Bhagwat rose through the ranks as the district and regional head of several RSS branches, including: the district leader of Akola, provincial leader of Nagpur and the state leader of Bihar. In 2000, Bhagwat was elected the RSS General Secretary. His father, Madhukarao Bhagwat, was a RSS leader in Gujarat and is known to have initiated L.K. Advani into the organization. Like many RSS activists, he is unmarried.

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